

SLATE-Z's Zahirah Mann: At the Intersection of Economic Revitalization & Climate Mitigation in South LA

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*South Los Angeles Transit Empowerment Zone (SLATE-Z) was formed to facilitate economic revitalization and environmental sustainability with the Crenshaw (K) Metro line infrastructure investment headed to the area. With a focus on understanding how SLATE-Z is revitalizing South LA by bringing economic opportunity to residents, TPR sat down with SLATE-Z's President & Chief Executive Officer **Zahirah Mann** to discuss the nonprofit's mission, objectives, partnerships, and strategies for equitable, transit-oriented economic development and climate mitigation.*

“[SLATE-Z's] focus is on revitalizing South LA by moving residents to economic opportunity...We work on issues related to jobs, small business and entrepreneurship, transit, education, and public safety. The throughline of these broad but interrelated priorities is economic revitalization and environmental sustainability.”—Zahirah Mann

Zahirah, can you begin by sharing SLATE-Z's impetus, mission, governance, and goals as a HUD-designated Promise Zone in South Los Angeles?

Zahirah Mann: SLATE-Z was founded in 2014 by the community as the Crenshaw (K) line was coming into South LA. Historically, transit lines have led to substantial economic activity in communities. As the Crenshaw Line was being developed, our community was looking at the economic opportunities being created. To channel and focus this work, we applied for a federal Promise Zone designation. We were unsuccessful the first time, but we were tenacious and able to get it on the second attempt.

In 2016, the South LA Promise Zone was federally designated, with Los Angeles Trade Technical College as the lead entity and SLATE-Z, the South Los Angeles Transit Empowerment Zone, as its backbone entity or convenor. Today, we have more than 100 cross-sector partners from government, academia, community-based organizations, and various associations. We also work and collaborate with businesses and residents. Our focus is on revitalizing South LA by moving residents to economic opportunity.

SLATE-Z, like other Promise Zone efforts, was developed as a collective impact approach to address poverty. We work on issues related to jobs, small business and entrepreneurship, transit, education, and public safety. The throughline of these broad but interrelated priorities is economic revitalization and environmental sustainability.

Please elaborate on SLATE-Z's economic development priorities and on its climate mitigation priorities.

We work at the intersection of economic revitalization and environmental sustainability and are focused on three priorities. First, preparing South LA's students, residents, and businesses for the new climate-resilient economy. Second, achieving true and sustainable transformation in South LA through historic economic investments, focusing on climate mitigation and resilience. And the third is facilitating the creation and promotion of green infrastructure in South LA that fosters job creation, mobility, wellness, and access. The solidification of those three priorities has surfaced over the years through our collaborative work with our partners on various initiatives.

Our collective work has already launched several exciting and transformative initiatives for South LA. For example, we are working with LADOT, Metro, and several community-based organizations on the Universal Basic Mobility Initiative, which is being funded by the California Air Resources Board and the City of LA. We were also recently awarded a historic revitalization grant from the California Strategic Growth Council's Transformative Climate Communities

Program to support the South LA Eco-Lab, a collaborative project that will foster green spaces, solar and EV technologies, car and bike-sharing, and tenants' rights workshops in our community. These initiatives leverage the K-Line and also advance the historic climate and infrastructure investments that the federal, state, and city governments are making right now.

Our last interview with SLATE-Z's previous executive director took place in February 2020 just before the pandemic. How has COVID-19 impacted SLATE-Z's Promise Zone priorities and the programming that was/is being advanced?

Like many other organizations, COVID-19 impacted every aspect of our work. South LA was heavily hit by COVID; unemployment rates rose and small businesses really suffered. Some of our small businesses were not even able to take advantage of PPP loans. All of that has created this new landscape and environment that we are still working through and trying to help improve. Those are just a few of the setbacks that stifled our efforts during that time. We were forced to shift our efforts and we are just now working to return to our pre-COVID baseline outcomes.

Overall, we at SLATE-Z have been impacted in the same ways many other organizations have been impacted by COVID. However, one unique difficulty for us during the pandemic was functioning as a convener - SLATE-Z's role is to coordinate many organizations to dedicate time, come together for conversation, and build consensus. During the pandemic, getting organizations to dedicate time to the collective was challenging, especially when each organization was dealing with its own very real struggles. Also, learning how to convene people and manage partnerships in a virtual space posed its own problem. But we soon learned how to navigate those new virtual spaces together and were able to do quite a bit to continue our work. For example, we made sure that resources were still flowing to the community, and found new ways to solve problems together that were very specific to COVID. As we look forward, we will continue to harness the agility and flexibility that we learned we were capable of during COVID.

I think our new data dashboard will be a game-changer in our collective work. It was developed for us by USC's Neighborhood Data for Social Change and other critical partners, and it will let all our stakeholders access timely data and track progress. As a collective impact effort, we need to be able to make informed decisions about our work and our shared mission. As we pilot various initiatives, we can reflect on our outcomes and determine if they should be scaled or shifted.

The partnership started around the promise of a rail line coming to South LA; the new K line. How has the build-out and the opening of that line affected what your partners are engaged in leveraging?

Yes, the K line is here and open, which is so exciting! The K line initiated our partnership with Metro, which has only been solidified and grown stronger over the years. Metro has been very supportive of the various efforts within South LA, whether that is around the K line or the Rail-to-Rail project being developed along Slauson, which is going to visually transform South LA and provide so much mobility and access. It will be incredible in terms of greening and providing a space for people to go biking and walking and just enjoy that corridor.

We are also working with Metro on the Universal Basic Mobility pilot and the Transformative Climate Communities work I mentioned, and they co-chair our transit work group. They have really been a very strong and solid partner.

They say in local government to "follow the money." At the end of November, the South LA Eco-Lab received \$35 million from the California Strategic Growth Council, paired with another \$24.6 million from the City of LA for climate projects. How's that money currently being deployed?

We are very, very excited about the South LA Eco-Lab. It is \$35 million from the State of California and leverages \$24.6 million from a combination of sources. The largest amount of leveraged funding is from Metro; the leveraged support also includes resources from the City of LA and various community-based organizations.

The South LA Eco-Lab is economic development through climate action. It includes the planting of 6,000 trees - TreePeople is a partner in that effort. It will involve a school greening project at 52nd Street Elementary School where currently, the schoolyard is asphalt; it will have soft scape and other greening efforts. There will be an E-bike library and electric vehicle charging stations. Metro is also involved in providing Fareless Transit passes for students, low-income residents, and senior citizens.

In total, 18 partners have come together to create the South LA Eco-Lab, including governmental entities like LADOT, LADWP, Metro, StreetsLA, and the Mayor's office of the City of LA under former Mayor Garcetti and under Mayor Karen Bass. LA Trade Technical College, which is the lead agency for our federal Promise Zone designation, is a partner as well as Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust, Community Partners, Climate Resolve, CicLAvia, CRCD, GRID Alternatives, LACI, SAJE, SCOPE, TreePeople, and Trust South LA. The 18 of us are coming together to support economic development through climate action in the heart of South LA.

TPR recently interviewed SoLa Impact's Martin Muoto. How does their work developing affordable housing in South LA and with their initiatives in training impact or overlap with SLATE-Z work?

It is an interesting question. We have gone to the Beehive to see if there are ways we can partner with them.

When we applied for Promise Zone designation, we did not specifically prioritize housing - we were told it would complicate our "story" based on how housing is understood in other parts of the country - so housing is not one of our levers of change.

We do discuss affordable housing and we do have partners who work on housing issues. Coalition for Responsible Community Development (CRCD) is a core partner of the South LA Eco-LA under the Transformative Climate Communities grant. Their focus on affordable housing intersects with our focus on jobs, especially around construction jobs and projects that have a project labor agreement. We also increasingly look at housing in terms of the siting of EV charging stations and how those charging stations are being located within new developments. Those are two spaces where I can see us potentially partnering with Martin and SoLA Impact.

And their work at the Beehive tech campus?

I worked in philanthropy for 10 years and I have been to see so many of the great projects that we have all over the county.

One of the entities doing impressive work around tech issues and other pieces is the Boys and Girls Club. I often wonder how other youth programs compare to a Boys and Girls Club model. I always think: What is the student or youth experience? I have not had the opportunity to review the work that is happening there regarding outputs and outcomes, and whether those youth are able to progress to other efforts. Those elements are what I would typically look at.

At SLATE-Z, in terms of our education priorities, we are looking at the K-12 system. Oftentimes, we look at high school students and graduation rates. We look at dual enrollment programs and activities that are going to help students on their career paths. We work with LAUSD, LA Promise Fund, LA Trade Technical College, and other academic institutions on that journey.

Let's pivot to Slate-Z's Public Allies Program and Nonprofit Career Apprenticeship Program. In line with our earlier questions, elaborate on the missions of those programs and how they're being implemented.

CDTech's Public Allies Program is a great program. It connects youth to nonprofit careers. Through SLATE-Z's Jobs Workgroup, we have several different focus areas as we look at high-growth careers. While we focus on green jobs and jobs in construction, nonprofit careers are also very much a focus. The nonprofit sector makes up about 10 percent of our economy and it is a space for living wage jobs.

CDTech's Public Allies Program has been around for quite some years. Their recent effort is more specific, focusing on nonprofit careers and the deployment in South LA. I really call on the brilliance of the leader at CDTech, Benny Torres, in implementing that program.

To touch on your earlier question regarding COVID - we saw a real strain on our nonprofit sector during the pandemic. Our nonprofits were on the front lines, providing essential and direct services. As a convener and systems organization, we are not a direct services provider, but our role is to provide support to these entities. The Nonprofit Career Apprenticeship Program helps address the challenge that we saw during the pandemic. It helps prepare youth for nonprofit careers and helps nonprofits with additional support.

We are in our second year of the program. Benny and his team can share outcomes. Overall, my understanding is that it has gone incredibly well, and the youth have given great presentations about what they have been able to learn with the various nonprofits.

You referenced some of your background with foundations and a legal career. How did those specific experiences shape how you frame and address these issues?

My work in LA has been split between being a public interest attorney, where I spent a decade, and then being in philanthropy, where I also spent a decade. My work in SLATE-Z brings those pieces together. But it starts even earlier, especially as we talk about this throughline of economic development and environmental revitalization. I started working on environmental justice issues almost 30 years ago. Those issues led me to many different places and to deeply understand what environmental issues look like in urban communities, starting from when I was an intern at the EPA.

After the EPA, I was focused on environmental justice, and I went to a law school that was helping to set environmental laws for the rest of the country. I then came to LA and worked for the Natural Resources Defense Council and worked on a host of environmental issues. From there, I started broadening into other systems issues. I worked for a law firm where I represented a number of governmental and nonprofit clients on issues related to election law, education, and these broader systems issues, around how we do business as a city or within our county, on policy issues that affect large portions of the population.

Over the years, I continued to work on environmental issues, was on the board of Communities for a Better Environment, and served as an alternate on the California Coastal Commission. I have been able to work on environmental issues throughout the years while still being attuned to issues around economic development within communities.

All these experiences led me to my work at SLATE-Z. My understanding of the legal framework, environmental issues, funding, and urban communities helps me understand how to address different perspectives and to facilitate the change that is needed.

Your impressive resume appears relatively light on “private sector” experience. Do you draw, to advance your current work, upon the private sector?

I have represented or otherwise worked for entities that fall within the private sector space - if we are defining the private sector as a sector focused on wealth generation. But, yes, a lot of my work has been in or for government and nonprofits. By working for nonprofits, I have worked with what is understood to be one of the most trusted sectors within our economy. I have been able to understand and focus on the needs of people and communities and help nonprofits and governments meet those needs.

I have been able to navigate between sectors by developing an understanding of varying and sometimes conflicting perspectives. That is what is needed to create a good settlement or community benefits agreement, to reach a place in the middle, and to find common ground to work together.